

“Christ Died to Set us Free”

Galatians 5:1-15

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I. Historical Background and Biblical Context:

In this letter to the Galatian churches, Paul is writing to set right those that have been wrongly influenced by visiting preachers. These preachers have tried to direct them away from their simple trust in Christ and obedience to Him. They have tried to make them legalistic by stressing that unless they rigidly observe certain points of ritual in the Law of Moses, such as circumcision, strict sabbath-keeping, the observance of certain Feasts, abstaining from ritually unclean food, ritual cleansing before meals, observing the Law’s requirements as expanded by the Rabbis, and so on, they would not be saved. Paul replies by stressing that salvation is not through religious observance or following a set of regulations, but is through faith in the sacrificial death of Christ, and that alone. Nothing else is required. And the result of that will be a practical righteousness which will result from the work of God’s Spirit within, a righteousness which will far exceed that required by the Pharisees and the Judaizes.

In the most recent chapter, Paul has sought to expand upon the central thought of the Christians adoption into the family of Christ by way of their confession and faith in Him. Paul argues that upon our confession of faith we become heirs with Christ, decedents of Isaac and children of the promise. The promise of a son made to Abraham and Sarah. That son is Isaac, born of Sarah, the free woman and not Hagar the slave. Because of faith in Christ, one is adopted into the family of the free woman.

II. The Lesson: “Christ Died to Set us Free”

1. vv. 1.

It appears that Paul is continuing with his argument of the final verses of chapter 4. He further informs the Galatian Christians that they are not to be children of slavery but children of freedom, children of liberty, equality and brotherhood (**Galatians 3:28**). That is why Christ gave his life for us, to set us free, so that we can be truly free (**John 8:36**). He implores the Galatians to

stand firm and refuse to be entangled by a yoke that will bring them into bondage. Christ set them free. Both by bearing the curse of sin on the cross (**Galatians 3:13**) and by indwelling their lives (**Galatians 2:20**). But even in light of this they must continually stand strong and firm to ensure they do not allow themselves to be dragged back into legalism. Paul warns that legalism is to be avoided. The person who is in Christ is free because the risen Christ Who dwells in him and lives through him is not bound by any law but walks simply in accordance with the Father's will. He takes Christ's yoke on him, a yoke which is easy, and of which the burden is light (**Matthew 11:28-30**).

2. vv. 2-4.

Paul wants the Galatians to know what they are turning away from. Here they are as Gentiles being faced up with the question as to whether they must be circumcised in order to find salvation. This refers, of course, to receiving circumcision as a necessary part of salvation. So Paul warns them of the dangers of circumcision. First, for them it will be a first step to, and indicate a commitment to, obeying "**the whole Law**" of Moses even as it has been as expanded by the Rabbis, including both ceremonial and moral requirements. It will be declaring that they want to be judged by the Law. And secondly, resulting from that, it will take away any benefit that is receivable from Christ. Christ will 'profit them nothing', He will be 'of no benefit to them', His death will be of no avail. For they will not be looking in faith to Him. They will have their eye continually on the Law and on their own efforts. And instead of loving God with all their hearts, and freely loving their neighbors, they will be tying themselves into a system which makes both God and neighbors a burden. Paul warns that by looking to the Law as their savior they will be alienated from Christ, and will be rendered ineffective and powerless. They will have nowhere to turn when they fail, because you can't have Christ on a hit and miss basis. There will be no relationship with Him. They will be strangers to Him, and He to them. For they will have rejected His sacrifice on the cross as their means of being reckoned as righteous and will be looking to the perfection of their own religious involvement and their striving to keep the Law. They will have drifted away from the position of accepting dependence on the grace, the unmerited favor of God, revealed through the cross. They will be depending on their own achievements, achievements that can never be sufficient.

3. v. 5.

The Judaizers promised complete righteousness in one's earthly life by obedience to the Law, beginning with circumcision and achieved with obedience to the Law. Paul spoke of righteousness coming in completeness in the age to come (**cf. 1:4**), rather than in the present age. The Judaizers looked for full righteousness in the present, Paul at the return of Christ.

4. v. 6.

Circumcision makes no difference to a man's inner life. What matters is faith working in response to the love of Christ, or faith expressing itself in love. What matters is to be circumcised in heart (**Romans 2:29; Philippians 3:3; Colossians 2:11**). It should be noted that all this does not mean that rules are necessarily a bad thing, or that the Law was a bad thing. As a guide for living and as a guide for knowing the mind of God they may be excellent. But where they become wrong, and indeed unchristian, is when they are used as a means of becoming acceptable to God, as a means of putting men 'in the right' with God. That is legalism, and Paul condemns that emphatically.

5. vv. 7-10.

Paul just cannot understand how the Galatians can be so foolish, when what they had received was so wonderful. He knows the value and the promise of the cross over that of the Law. And whoever it is that is being so persuasive to them, Paul wants them to know that they are not doing so at God's command. Because the One (God) who calls them desires that they be truly free in Christ.

Paul warns, a small amount of false teaching affects a large number so that in the end all are affected. Or it can enter the individual mind and gradually possess it until that person is totally affected. He is stressing the danger that, when something like legalism begins to get a toehold, it is not long before it takes control of the whole. It spreads like yeast throughout the whole batch of dough. But Paul now assures them that he is confident that they will come out of this okay because they are in the Lord's hands. **Note:** Paul's confidence is first in the Lord, but secondly in them. He is confident that the will of God for the Galatians will reign supreme and the one who is influencing them will be dealt with by God. They will have to give account to God (**cf. Rom. 14: 10-12**).

6. vv. 11-12.

Some may have pointed at cases like Timothy's where Paul had allowed circumcision. And that he still allowed Christian Jews to circumcise their sons if they wished to. But they then accuse him of '**preaching circumcision**' by his actions. Paul now takes the liberty to defend himself against such accusations. He points out that he suffers persecution precisely because he preaches the message of the cross as the only way of salvation, and rejects anything else as necessary for salvation. And that in and of itself is the offense/stumbling block of the cross.

The reason that the cross is an offense is because by it all else, and especially circumcision, is put in its proper place as not being essential. From a salvation point of view, it is irrelevant, no matter what it is. It says that all must be accepted as cursed. This means, all ordinances and good works are excluded as contributing to salvation. Such ordinances, including circumcision, may be all right for those whose customs they are, as long as that is all that they make of it, but they must not be magnified into something supremely important, something essential to being saved. Deut. 23:1

7. vv. 13 14.

As Pau has previously argued, they were called by God and Christ died with the purpose of their being made free. Free from the Law and its demands, free from its restrictions, free from final condemnation (**Romans 5:1**). But now he asks them to recognize that this does not give them the freedom to behave any way they like. It does not mean that they can give their flesh free rein.

God calls us to be free, to enjoy freedom from the bondage of the Law. But this is not to be looked on as an opportunity for gratifying fleshly desires. **We are not free from seeking to be righteous.** Our freedom is rather to be seen as an opportunity to be free to demonstrate Christian love. Through love Christians will be 'slaves' to each other, because their love makes them want to serve each other. They can now turn and make use of the Law.

Because **the Law can help them to know the mind of God.** And he quotes them an example to prove it. He points out that Jesus does want them to fulfil the Law in a positive way by loving their neighbors as themselves. They can demonstrate this by humbly serving each other 'through love'. This means we consider other people's needs, happiness and satisfaction as being of equal, if not greater, concern than our own.